

## RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Sunday, December 4, 2011

**Q** : Do you believe we're in the 'last days'?

**A** : When asked to speculate about issues like the beginning or end of Time, the historical Buddha maintained a 'noble silence'. He instructs us that such questions are of no use in the immediate presence of human suffering and the challenge of its relief. Death comes soon enough and we cannot be assured our next form of existence will be as fortunate. We are advised that a human birth is very precious and we ought use it to attend to that question alone. A verse directs us "do not squander your life".

The historical-cultural environment of early Buddhism did not endorse any kind of linear or eschatological ('last days') view of history. In fact, it adopted one much more in step with modern science with multiple dimensions of time in incomprehensible expanses of both time and space.

One major sect of Buddhist teaching, the Pure Lands School, has introduced a distinction in the Buddhist vision of time/space called the Three Ages. These ages separate a block of human history, wherein we are located. It does not suggest a beginning or end of time, only a waxing/waning of certain spiritual capacities in humans.

The first of these ages is known as The Age of Complete Capacity, where humans were fully capable of realizing the teaching of the Buddhas. The second was an Age of

Compromised Abilities, and humans are less able. The third age, the one wherein we find ourselves at present, is called *mappo*, the Age of Decayed Capacity. It is said to have begun about five centuries ago and will last another ten thousand years. During this time, humans, because of their own moral decline, will have a diminished capacity to understand and fulfill the Buddhadharma on their own. They will need to rely on "Other Power" (that is, the moral and insight energies of the Buddhas) to realize full Awakening. As such, the religious activities appropriate to this age rely less on self-driven meditative practices and more ones of chanting and prayer, practices which create a collaboration between humans and other energies.

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